

Reclaiming Normal by Punzie the Platypus

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Summary: Between S1 and S2. Bob shows an interest in Castle Byers; Jonathan, reluctantly, has to show it to him alone; Will's far too scarred from his experience in the hellish version of Castle Byers in the Upside Down. It's only when Bob says that the brothers must've made great memories in the old playhouse that Jonathan decides to remind Will of the goodness of /their/ Castle Byers.

Reclaiming Normal

Soli Deo gloria

DISCLAIMER: I do NOT own Stranger Things. Or RadioShack. Or Parchessi. Or Lord of the Rings.

Here's for a brother-centric fic. :)

Will and Jonathan recognized that Bob was trying his hardest to relate to them. It was hard, since he'd never been a father and both of these boys possessed more tactful intelligence than he gave them credit for (he didn't interact with boys too much—it was mostly adults at RadioShack. But he *wanted* to relate to them) and he, you know, was dating their mother, but he was trying very, *very* hard. Will and Jonathan, despite knowing the exact moments he came across as cheesy or overbearing or just plain ignorant (note: anything to do with the Upside Down), gave him plenty of grace. They coped by exchanging glances at each other above Bob's head and hiding smiles from him.

He came over often, for dinner and talking and sometimes just to sit on the sofa while Joyce watched TV and rubbed her feet. He eventually integrated himself so thoroughly into the weird topsy-turvy lives of the Byers that he no longer stuck out among them. He was no longer Bob Newby, Joyce's new boyfriend who was over a lot. He was just . . . Bob. Both the boys did nothing more but say "Hello" when they saw him, unannounced, talking in the kitchen to their mom. He was part of their new 'normal'. Things hadn't gone back to the way they were before the Upside Down, back to normal, but that was okay, for the most part. Bob was one of the best parts of their new 'normal'.

Will liked him well enough while Jonathan still felt a little friction with him. He *was* trying too hard, after all. And after Lonnie, his dad . . . Jonathan felt a little pushed out of the spot of the man of the family, a spot he'd inherited and kept up. He wouldn't say anything, but he wouldn't abdicate quietly.

One Saturday evening in March, perhaps a month or two after Joyce

and Bob started holding hands in front of the boys, Bob peered out the back door at Castle Byers. "What's that out there?" he said, pointing with the hand not holding his steaming coffee mug.

Joyce followed his line of pointing through the kitchen window above the sink. "Oh, that? That's Castle Byers. It's Will's fort." She nervously looked over at her youngest son silently watching cartoons. She knew now his attention had been firmly diverted from the TV screen; his mind would take him back to that long week of living in the hellish version of his beloved Castle.

"Wow. Made it yourself, Will?" Bob said in a conversational voice (again, ignorance. Jonathan and Joyce and Will, all in on this little 'in joke' between a handful of Hawkins residents, all exchanged looks. Poor, poor ignorant Bob).

"No. Jonathan helped me," Will said, finally finding his tongue. His mouth had gone cotton dry.

"Looks like a sturdy structure. What say we have a closer look?" Bob suggested.

Jonathan didn't feel particularly inclined to show off his and Will's treasured, sacred spot to the likes of ignorant Bob Newby, but a look from his mom convinced him to put on his jacket. (The look said, 'He doesn't know, and he's curious; it'll be good bonding. Please, Jonathan?'). Bob headed out the back door all bundled up with a kiss from Joyce on his cheek, and Joyce turned to Jonathan. "Thank you," was all she said, all the anxiety and nervousness and relief playing out on her face.

"Yeah, well, he doesn't know," Jonathan said, shrugging. "I just wish he wouldn't poke his nose into things that don't concern him."

"He just wants to spend time with you boys, that's all," Joyce said. "He wants to get to know you."

"And what if we don't want to get to know him?" Jonathan finally went out and said it. He regretted it the moment he said it; he meant it; he couldn't take it back; he couldn't take it back to make his mom's face not look like he'd slapped her. "It's just . . ." He *did* try to

backtrack, "it's none of his business. Will and I made Castle Byers when you and Dad were getting divorced. It's ours. It's none of his business."

"He doesn't know that. And he's trying, *really* trying, Jonathan, and, you know, it's hard," Joyce said, "it's hard to date someone who already has kids. I mean, you both are almost grown, and it's hard to get to know you both when you're so old already. Just—just give him a chance, o-okay? Just give him a chance."

"I am," Jonathan said firmly, trying to not provoke his mom any further, "I *am*. It's just . . . it's a lot. It's a lot of force. It doesn't come naturally. But we'll do it." Jonathan called over his shoulder. "We'll do it for you, Mom. Right, Will?"

Will didn't respond.

Jonathan and Joyce looked past Jonathan's shoulder. Will's back, set straight against their squashed couch's armrest, was to them. "Will?" Jonathan said, a little worry lacing his voice.

"Will?" Joyce said, unapologetic, unmasked worry in her voice. She ran and fell to her knees beside the sofa. Every time he didn't respond, or was quiet, or blank-faced, she worried harder. She could barely let him go back to school after the Upside Down. She was always worried that she was going to lose him.

Will's blank face stared straight ahead. He came back from his thoughts to turn to his mother. He rasped, in response to her worried gasps and desperate clutch of his hand, "Yes?"

"Are you okay?" Joyce asked anxiously.

Will gave her a little ghost of a smile. A corner of his mouth uplifted, but disappeared just as quickly, like he'd never lifted it to begin with. "I'm okay," he said.

Desperation no longer gripped Joyce. The worry lines didn't fade, but her sense of urgency did, little by little. She said, "Okay. Do you want to go with Bob to Castle Byers, baby?"

Will looked at his mom and said, "Sure." He looked at Jonathan, who

had much better hidden anxiety, like a poor animal caught in a trap, begging him with his eyes to let him out.

Jonathan silently asked him, "Hey, are you okay?" with his eyes as the brothers shrugged on their jackets. He quickly shot a glance over to their mother, but Joyce was thankfully blissfully ignorant of Will's anxious face. She'd turned back to her dishes, happy in the fact that all her boys were bonding.

Will, meanwhile, paused at the back door stoop. His eyes flickered nervously over their unkempt backyard, traveling past the sparse grass and the shed that was falling apart, landing finally on that one structure blending in with the rest of the leafless trees. He knew it wasn't it . . . he *knew* . . . but he couldn't take a single step closer to it.

"Will?" Will looked back to his brother still standing in the doorway. Obvious worry and concern took over his face. Jonathan felt the blood drain from his face as he hurriedly shot his mother one last look before slamming the door behind them and grabbing his little brother's arms. "Will? What is it? Did something happen? Is it—is it back?" Jonathan asked, stuttering at the mere idea of just speaking that possibility out loud.

Neither could tell if Will's shaking was trembling or Jonathan shaking him. Will was silent, just bug-eyed, begging Jonathan without a word to not send him there.

"It's not back," Will finally forced out.

"Okay. Okay, that's good," Jonathan put a hand at Will's cheek in relief. "Okay. What is it, Will? Did you see something? Are you here? What is it?"

"Castle Byers," Will finally rasped.

Jonathan, clearly, couldn't understand his little brother. Confused, "Castle Byers? What—what about Castle Byers, Will?"

"I-I can't go in there," Will said, a tear trembling in his eye before free-falling down his face.

"Why not? Why can't you—?" Then it hit Jonathan like a rude slap to the face; the obviousness of it struck him along with the pain of the realization; *of course, idiot*. "The Upside Down." Words finally stumbled out of Jonathan's mouth, tripping and faltering. He looked guiltily at his little brother. "That's where you stayed in the Upside Down—Castle Byers."

"It's where . . . *it* f-found me. . ." Will trembled. All that ran through his mind was this irrational, irrevocable truth: if he took one step back into Castle Byers, he'd be snatched back into the Upside Down again. Going back to Castle Byers was like falling off a horse, getting injured, and then, once recovered, getting back onto it. There was no promise that the same thing wouldn't happen again. That was the thing. Sure, it would almost impossible for it all to happen a second time, but it all lay in the existence of that one single word: *almost*. Will could rest easy if *almost* didn't exist.

"Will. . ." Jonathan said, feeling awful for his poor kid brother.

"Jonathan, don't make me go in there. Please. *Please*." How could Jonathan deny Will anything, especially something as simple as this?

"Of course not. You don't have to go there, no. I'll—I'll smooth it over with Bob. I'll explain to Mom. I'll take care of it." Jonathan hugged Will and hoped that the strong embrace of his older brother soothed him and reminded him that he was safe. (As if he could save Will from the Upside Down. Will just needed the *idea* that he could, or he'd live in constant fear for the rest of his life.) "Go back inside, okay?"

Will's head wagged fervently and he almost tripped, scrambling back into the seemingly safe shelter of the house.

Jonathan stood up and pocketed his hands and let out a slow, thoughtful breath. Then he tramped across the half-frozen backyard, his loud echoing footsteps trampling the strewn pine needles and damp leaves.

Bob stood outside Castle Byers, having come to a stop after circling the castle in a grand, one-overing inspection. "It's amazing," he said.

"Huh?" Jonathan said, pulling words out even as he worked hard to pull himself out of his thoughts.

"It's amazing, that it can stand," Bob elaborated. He rapped his knuckles on it. "It doesn't look very structurally sound, yet it stands. It should blow over by the smallest breeze, and yet it stands. How does it, do you think?" Bob looked with real interest (and such, *such* ignorance) to Jonathan in wonder.

"It's strong," Jonathan said quickly, firmly. "It's strong and sturdy, though it doesn't look like it." Like his mom. Like Will. It wasn't the prettiest thing in the world; it was cobbled together and homemade, but it was strong. It was comforting, in a way. It might not present itself as an awful reminder of a worse time in an even worse place to Will, but during Will's time in the Upside Down, it provided him with a comforting shelter. He *did* find safety in there, once upon a time. It just didn't last the whole time.

Bob made to enter it, but Jonathan spoke up. "You have to say the password," he said hurriedly.

Bob looked up, surprised. "The password? What kind of password?"

There was little point for Bob to say the password. The only reasons for a password is that Will wanted one, and it alerted him to other people near his domain. It gave him a chance to decide whether or not to admit them. Still, Jonathan said firmly, in defense of his brother, "*The* password."

Bob stared at him. "Okay," he finally said, good-naturedly, going along with it, "but what *is* the password?"

Jonathan was loathe to give it to him. He finally decided 'why not; whatever. Doesn't matter'. "*Radagast*."

"*Radagast*? Isn't that out of Lord of the Rings?" Bob said with a little chuckle.

"*Hobbit*," Jonathan was quick to correct.

"Ehhh, they're pretty much the same thing, so . . ." Bob shrugged before whispering into the entrance, "*Radagast*," before turning to

Jonathan, asking with a bit of sudden inspired humor, "or shall I not enter?"

Jonathan held his tongue, or else he would forbid him to enter. He stood outside with his hands in his pockets, almost like a guard of Will's castle. His eyes kept flickering from the castle back to the house, wondering about the state of his little brother.

Bob eventually popped out after making several observational comments that Jonathan didn't bother to listen to and said, "Well, there's not too much light in that place, but it's all right, I guess."

"Yeah, I guess," Jonathan said, in a voice that hoped that they could wrap this up and head back to the house.

"Could do with a few modifications, though," Bob said, in a voice that would hopefully lead into *more* conversation.

Jonathan wasn't in the mood to take the bait. He instead took a step toward the house. "I think it's pretty okay the way it is."

"Sure it is," Bob conceded, "you and Will made it together, right?"

Jonathan swallowed. He'd rather not recount the minute details of that wonderful, awful night to his mother's boyfriend. He sidestepped. "We did."

"Man, I wish I had a Castle Byers growing up," Bob said jovially as he followed Jonathan's hunched back toward the house. "But then, I was more of a sci-fi kid. Still, what a great place to go hang out and read comic books and get away from it all. It's like a whole world to a kid. I bet you and Will have a lot of great memories from it."

Jonathan thought back to the times he and Will would play Parcheesi in there, or camp out with a little fire roasting marshmallows, or lie on their backs with their heads peeking out to look up and point out the constellations twinkling in the night sky. He recalled other times, like finding Will there after a hard day of school full of stupid bullies calling him awful names and just talking to his little brother there until he was okay again.

Jonathan's perception about Castle Byers slowly changed. Will was

right—it was haunted by the memories of its counterpart in the Upside Down. But then, it was still full of memories from their time in it on their Earth. It was associated with pollution floating in the air and monsters lurking around every corner, and it was associated with bags of pretzels and Lord of the Rings and broken crayons.

"Yeah," Jonathan said slowly, finally coming out of his own head, "we do."

"So, how'd it go?" Joyce attached herself to Bob's arm once they were back inside. "What did you think?"

"I think it is a great combination of imagination and childhood engineering," Bob said. Said by any other grown-up, it would've come across as patronizing. Bob, however, meant it very genuinely.

"That's—that's great," Joyce said, relief being swallowed into a semblance of calm normalcy. She looked at Jonathan. "All good?"

A quick nod. "All good."

Jonathan left his mom to make googly eyes at Bob Newby while he went off on a mission. He grabbed sleeping bags, a bag of marshmallows, a couple of battery-operated lanterns, and a pile of books—books about stars, spaceships, and *Lord of the Rings*. *The Hobbit*, too. He shoved all these items into bags and dragged them over to Will's bedroom door. His camera dangled from a neck-strap; it thudded against his chest as he gulped and knocked slowly but distinctly on Will's bedroom door.

"Will?" his clear voice called.

Instead of calling for his brother to come in, Will cracked the door open. "What is it?" he asked.

Jonathan wasn't about to let the cat out of the bag. He said, "C'mon. I wanna show you something."

"What?" Will wanted to know.

"Will," Jonathan said quietly, "you trust me, right?"

Will nodded.

"Trust me. Okay?"

Will had to. "Okay."

Jonathan nodded. Will stepped out and received the proffered bag from his brother. He felt its weight but didn't treat his piqued curiosity by peeking into it. He instead followed Jonathan out into the yard. His heart failed within him as his suspicions were confirmed by Jonathan stopping outside Castle Byers. Will stopped where he was, a few feet away, and shook his head. "No. I'm not going back in there, Jonathan."

"Will," Jonathan said, "I know you have a lot of bad memories of this place. But . . . there's been a *lot* of good memories in here, too." He stepped inside ("*Radagast*"), making Will shudder. He popped out immediately, now free of the bag he'd been hefting around on his shoulder. "Will, this isn't that place. This isn't the Castle Byers in the Upside Down. This . . . this is *our* Castle Byers. *We* built this. We've hung out in here *countless* times. Don't you remember those times?" Jonathan dug around the bag Will still held and held up *The Return of the King*. "I finished reading this to you out here. We stayed up 'til, like, two in the morning finishing it, didn't we?"

Will couldn't help cracking a reactive smile. "Mom woke us up screaming that we were going to be late to school. We really were."

"Yeah, she did. Remember that time we made that comic book? We made up the story together and you drew it and I wrote it out?" Jonathan said, a smile now on his own face.

Will nodded; he looked at Castle Byers with a faded smile; he was still scared, but that fright was mixed in with feelings of warmth from all these old memories.

"I've got marshmallows and *Hobbit*," Jonathan said, saving the best for the last.

Will breathed in deep and nodded. Despite Jonathan's cover of niceness, he knew what Jonathan was trying to do, and he

appreciated it. He needed to get back to normal.

He handed the bag off to Jonathan, took a deep breath, and approached Castle Byers. Jonathan stood silent, watching, as Will put his hand to the wall. His breathing was quickened and his eyes sticking out of his head. He was scared.

But he was Will Byers. He was also brave.

He disappeared into the familiar shelter of Castle Byers. He looked around at the walls and felt his pulse soften. Yes, it was like the Castle Byers of the Upside Down, and yet it *wasn't*. It wasn't ghoulish and gross, with the pressure of danger lurking like an enclosing shadow over the castle. It was warm and dry and messy but *homey*. Slowly, Will's heartrate fell to a normal pace. He slowly came back down to normal.

Jonathan stepped in. His step didn't startle or scare Will. Good. "Hey," Jonathan said, as Will sank down onto the sleeping bag Jonathan had laid out. His eyes spoke volumes. "You okay?"

Will nodded; it wasn't a stilted nod this time; it was strong and sure. "Yeah," he said. "I'm okay."

Jonathan genuinely smiled and dropped his bag. He promised a campfire as he hurried back inside to grab matches and tell Joyce of their plan of a sleepover that night.

"Oh, just like old times," Joyce said, grateful that Will was okay; that they had once again reclaimed a little bit of 'normal'. Maybe he *would* be okay.

"Yeah," Jonathan said, grabbing the matches, relieved, "just like old times."

Did I just make a bunch of LotR references because of Sean Astin? *You bet I did.*

So that, dear readers, shall be my last fanfiction story for the year. You should expect some more stories next year, but far less than this year, as I'm hoping to get some work done on my own personal novel writing. I love these characters, but I love my

own characters, too.

Thanks for reading. Merry Christmas!